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Beethoven, Weber and Berlioz
Imitation and influence

Readers of the *Gazette Musicale de Paris* on the Sunday morning of the 6th of July 1834 must have been surprised by the anonymous leading article that met their gaze. "The numerous admirers of Beethoven and Weber are overjoyed", it began. "Authorization for the performance of German opera has just been granted to the Théâtre Ventadour", adding that this was a matter of not just a few performances but the annual engagement of a German company. The writer went on to lambast the poverty and triviality of the Parisian musical theatre, and to declare that, "The German theatre coming to us from beyond the Rhine, without making any concession to the stupid demands of our Parisian fashions [...] will with its vigorous harmonies, its original melodies, its abrupt forms, such varied and original orchestration, its spirited choruses, its blonde and dreamy prima donnas certainly make a sharp contrast to our national habits"; and he looks forward to a new inquisitive and enthusiastic audience invading the Ventadour unable to resist the force of "the Titan Beethoven".[1] The article is unsigned; but are we beginning to suspect who the author might be? Katherine Reeve and Kerry Murphy have attributed it to Berlioz;[2] and the verve of the writing and the vigour of the attack on Parisian manners lend force to that, but the real give-away is in the opening sentence connecting Beethoven and Weber. When he wrote about German music, Berlioz repeatedly linked their names; indeed, turning the pages of the early volumes of his letters in the Collected Edition, one finds their names more often paired than mentioned separately. And in *Le Correspondant* he writes in 1830,

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1 "Les nombreux adorateurs de Beethoven et de Weber sont dans la joie. L'autorisation de jouer l'opéra allemand vient d'être accordée au théâtre Ventadour [...]. Le théâtre allemand nous arrivant d'outre-Rhin, sans aucune concession faire aux sottes exigences de nos mode Parisiennes, [...] avec ses harmonies pleines de vigueur, ses mélodies originales, ses formes abruptes, son instrumentation si variée, si originale, se chœurs entrainans, ses blondes et rêveuses prime donnes, formera certe un piquant contraste à nos habitudes nationales". *Gazette musicale*, 6 July 1834, pp. 213–14.

2 D. Kern Holoman, *Catalogue of the Works of Hector Berlioz*, Kassel 1987 (The New Berlioz Edition 25), p. 438, col. 2, C 64. *De l'utilité d'un Opéra-Allemand à Paris.*

> In the compositions of Beethoven and of Weber one recognises a poetic thought revealing itself everywhere. It is music depending entirely on itself, without the help of words to determine its expression; its language therefore becomes extremely vague and thereby acquires even greater power for those who are gifted with imagination [...] Hence the extraordinary effects, the strange sensations, the inexpressible emotions produced by the symphonies, the quartets, overtures, sonatas of Weber and of Beethoven.[3]

On the face of it, this may seem rather an uneven choice of composers to represent the great tradition of German music. Moreover, Weber wrote no string quartets, and Berlioz certainly did not rank Weber's two youthful symphonies with any of Beethoven's. But we must remember, perhaps reluctantly, that for much of his life Berlioz considered Bach an old fogey, dismissing his fugues as "gibberish",[4] and called Handel "a barrel of pork and beer";[5] he was selective in his appreciation of Mozart, which only grew slowly, and he could be surprisingly disdainful of Haydn, especially when there was any question of comparing the two of them with Beethoven, whom he held in awe; while he felt an affinity amounting to personal closeness to Weber, whom, in the story he tells so entertainingly in the *Memoirs*, he vainly pursued round Paris in 1826 in the hope of a meeting. Almost all composers, even ones like Berlioz with sharp intelligences and equally sharp pens, form their judgements with reference to their creative needs, and it seems that he felt he needed to clear the 18th century field so as make way for 19th century advances.

When Habeneck introduced Beethoven into the newly founded Conservatoire concerts, the *Eroica* on 9th March 1828, the *Fifth Symphony* on 13th April, Berlioz wrote,

> I had just had the successive revelations of Shakespeare and Weber. Now, at another point on the horizon I saw the giant form of Beethoven rear up. The shock was almost as great as that of Shakespeare had been.

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3 "[...] dans les compositions de Beethoven et de Weber, on reconnaît une pensée poétique qui se manifeste partout. C'est la musique livrée à elle-même, sans le secours de la parole pour en préciser l'expression; son langage devient alors extrêmement vague et par là même acquiert encore plus de puissance sur les êtres doués d'imagination [...] De là les effets extraordinaires, les sensations étranges, les émotions inexprimables que produisent les symphonies, les quatuors, ouvertures, sonates de Weber et de Beethoven". *Le Correspondant*, 22 October 1830.

4 "j'abhorre ce grimoire". Letter to Nanci Berlioz, 28 December 1829, Hector Berlioz, *Correspondance Générale* I (1803–1832), ed. by Pierre Citron, Paris 1972, p. 294.

5 "[...] la lourde face *emperruqué* de ce tonneau de porc et de bière qu'on nomme Händel!" Letter to Toussaint Bennet, 26 or 27 January 1857, Hector Berlioz, *Correspondance Générale* V (1855–1859), ed. by Hugh J. Macdonald and François Lesure, Paris 1989, p. 418.

> Beethoven opened before me a new world of music, as Shakespeare had revealed a new universe of poetry.[6]

As all Berliozians know, he wrote copiously and eloquently about Beethoven, and it's still rewarding to read the accounts of Beethoven's symphonies that found their way into the collection *A travers chants*. Descriptive writing of this kind is out of favour nowadays; but how revealing much of it is, and how sympathetic to find a commentator willing to confess himself puzzled, as with the *Allegretto scherzando* of the *Eighth Symphony*. I'm sure I'm not the only listener to have been bewildered on first hearing that movement's abrupt ending, and to remain so, as Beethoven seems suddenly to lose patience with what he's doing and just scribbles a violent *fortissimo* across the page as if saying, "Oh, forget it". Turn to Berlioz for enlightenment, and we find that he can't explain it to himself either: "Je n'ai jamais pu m'expliquer cette boutade" – *boutade* is a wonderful word meaning a sudden illogical outburst, often of bad temper; and it perfectly catches Beethoven's occasional propensity to shake his fist or burst out with a sudden laugh in the face of his audience. If we turn back to the title page of *A travers chants*, we find that Berlioz describes his collection of essays as "Études musicales, adorations, boutades et critiques".

But it's not my intention to offer another discussion of Berlioz's writing on Beethoven. We already have David Cairns's admirable essay on the subject in Peter Bloom's *Cambridge Companion*.[7] I would prefer to consider some of the ways in which Berlioz's own music was influenced. And as a preliminary, perhaps we ought to be clear what we really mean by the often loosely applied term, "influence". There is certain to be argument about where the bounds lie. We should surely refer to more than plain imitation, just copying a gesture perhaps in a slightly different way, and mean what the word literally implies, the flowing, *Einfluss*, of an idea from the creative imagination of one artist into that of another. The opening of the finale of *Harold in Italy* is surely more imitation than influence. Berlioz had read through Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in 1829 but not actually heard the work until January 1834, the month in which he began work on *Harold*. I venture to suggest that the opening of the finale with quotations of the three previous movements is the plain use of Beethoven's idea, the impact of which was fresh in his mind and which solved a problem for him, but is something that has not been fully absorbed into his imagination. He had also heard the *Seventh Symphony*, performed twice at Habeneck's Conservatoire concerts in 1829, and the effect of the *Allegretto* on the audience was captured in the picture

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6 Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires*, ed. by Pierre Citron, Paris 1991, Ch. 20, trans. *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, translated and ed. by David Cairns, London 1969.

7 David Cairns, *Berlioz and Beethoven*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. by Peter Bloom, Cambridge 2000, p. 223–34.

by Horace Vernet's pupil Eugène Lami of members of an enrapt audience, smiling, frowning in concentration, lips pursed, mouth open, head in hands, totally absorbed by the music.

Berlioz's critical reaction was one of his most detailed and poetic descriptions, poetic indeed to the point of including two Shakespeare quotations and one misquotation from Thomas Moore. Surely this plunged more deeply into his imagination, bringing into his mind something not from Byron, the ostensible source of his symphony, but from his distant memory of lying in a field as a boy and listening to the chanting of a passing Rogation procession across the stirring of the corn. Describing Beethoven's movement, he writes of the insistent rhythm of dactyl and spondee (– . . | – –) and of the skill with which Beethoven varies his expression of this inexorable rhythm. His own *Pilgrims' March* with them singing the evening prayer suggests the endless repetition of a chant; but in fact, though as with Beethoven, the rhythm does not change, the melody changes the whole time, and if we take just the first ten repetitions, at the end of each eight bar phrase the varied melody ends with a different cadence and comes to rest on a different chord.

Surely one could say that whereas the *Harold* finale's recollections are the re-use of a Beethoven device, Beethoven's *Allegretto* inspired something deep in Berlioz's own imagination, that this is indeed influence rather than imitation. There are of course other examples one could cite. There is for instance the broken melody, which Beethoven must have noticed in Haydn's generally witty uses, but which he himself employed to strong dramatic effect. Of a number of examples in Beethoven, the most moving is surely the end of the *Funeral March* of the *Eroica*, where the music several times breaks off as if too burdened by grief to continue. Certainly it moved Berlioz, who admits as much and concentrates on it in his essay. With his Virgilian sensibilities, he compares the movement to one of the most emotionally charged passages in the whole of the *Aeneid*, the funeral cortège of the young Pallas that opens Book Eleven; he just quotes a few lines, and saves his detailed description for the fragmentation of Beethoven's march theme. Other composers have turned to this device of the broken melody, memorably Schubert at the climax of *"Gretchen am Spinnrade"*, when Gretchen is too overcome by the thought of Faust's kiss to be able to continue and both her voice and the spinning wheel come to a halt. Again, in the finale of Schubert's late *A major piano sonata*, when the great striding melody falters and stumbles heart-breakingly to a halt several times before gathering itself together for the conclusion. Berlioz, no pianist, may not have known the sonata, but he turns the device of the broken melody that moved him in the *Eroica* to his own ends in *Faust* with "D'amour, l'ardente flame" and at the affecting end of *La Captive*.

Most significantly, Berlioz was, famously, one of the composers who recognized that with the *Ninth Symphony*, Beethoven, this great German composer, had brought music to a critical point. Symphonic music could never be the same again. For Wagner, claiming that the *Ninth Symphony* was music crying out for redemption by poetry and, with his short story *Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven* in 1840, that the Master's cloak had fallen upon him, the symphonization of drama was the answer; and to make his point it was with the *Ninth Symphony* that he opened Bayreuth in 1876. Liszt, though humble before Beethoven's genius, writes one scholar,

> considered his orchestral compositions to be a continuation of Beethoven's achievement. According to the view strongly held by Liszt and Wagner, the symphony – with the exception of Berlioz – had become stagnant after Beethoven. Liszt saw it as his mission to take orchestral composition further along the path initiated by the great symphonist.[8]

As for Berlioz himself, as he wrote to his chemist friend Édouard Rocher in 1829,

> What musical ideas are fermenting in me [...] Now that I have burst the bridle of routine, I see a vast field spreading out before me, one which scholastic rules were forbidding me to enter. Now that I have heard this awe-inspiring giant Beethoven I understand the point which the art of music has reached; it's a matter of taking it up at that point and pressing on further [...] not further, that's impossible, he's reached the limits of art, but as far in another direction.[9]

And so the new direction was dramatic symphony, the *Symphonie fantastique*, *Harold in Italy*, the *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*, especially the symphonically subtle *Romeo and Juliet*.

Beethoven and Weber met only once, in 1823 when Weber was in Vienna for the première of *Euryanthe*. With a couple of friends he drove out to Baden, where the two composers greeted each other warmly and went out for a convivial lunch together at which Beethoven played a generous and attentive host. Weber had a particular admiration for *Fidelio*, which he had conducted in Dresden, and Beethoven in turn was

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8 Reeves Shulstad, *Liszt's symphonic poems and symphonies*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. by Kenneth Hamilton, Cambridge 2005, p. 206.

9 "que d'idées musicales fermentent en moi [...] à présent que j'ai brisé le frein de la routine, je vois se dérouler un champ immense, dans lequel les règles scholastiques me défendaient d'entrer. A présent que j'ai entendu cet effrayant géant Beethoven, je sais à quel point en est l'art musical, il s'agit de le prendre à ce point-là et de pousser plus loin [...] pas plus loin, c'est impossible, il a atteint les bornes de l'art, mais aussi loin dans une autre route." Letter to Édouard Rocher, 11 January 1829, *CG* I (see note 4), p. 229.

very impressed with *Der Freischütz*, which by then had embarked on its triumphant progress round Europe. It reached Paris in the following year, at the Odéon on Thursday the 7th of December 1824 in the guise of *Robin des bois*, adapted by Thomas Sauvage and the ubiquitous Castil-Blaze but apparently suffering only the elimination of the Hermit. The anonymous reviewer in the *Journal des débats* treated the music with respect and praised the orchestra, but was scathing about the feebleness of singers, declaring that confiding Weber's score to them was "like giving the armour of Achilles to pygmies".[10] A second performance which he mentioned as planned for the following Tuesday appears to have been cancelled, but nine days later the work returned, it seems further adapted by Sauvage and Castil-Blaze. However mutilated, it was very popular, receiving over a hundred performances. As Berlioz notes bitterly, in his sharp account of the première which opens Chapter 16 of the *Memoirs*, it made the Odéon a fortune, and Castil-Blaze a good hundred thousand francs.

In his English translation, David Cairns footnotes the butchery inflicted upon the work; but rather than dwell on that, we may note that Berlioz claims to have abandoned his worship of classical opera and forsaken the Opéra, never missing a performance at the Odéon, soon knowing *Der Freischütz*, or what was performed of it, by heart. Between 1825 and 1827 he was largely occupied with his first opera, *Les Francs-juges*, whose tribulations have been well documented; but we should note here the letter he wrote to the work's librettist, his friend Humbert Ferrand, in June 1829, when the work was rejected by the Opéra and he was entertaining hopes of German performance. He writes, "I'll have it translated into German. I'll finish the music; I'll make it an opera like the *Freischütz*, half spoken, half melodrama, and the rest music, I'll add four or five pieces […]"[11] When he writes of the work being like *Der Freischütz*, he is evidently referring principally to the form. In the overture and the surviving pieces of *Les Francs-juges*, there is not much specifically Weberian. Perhaps one could single out one use of clarinets in the low chalumeau register, some piccolo flashes, a certain independence for the violas; though these are characteristic of Weber's scoring, they might not strike one if one were not on the lookout for them. The two composers were close. As is well known, when *Der Freischütz* was finally to be admitted through the sacred portals of the Opéra he agreed to write the compulsory recitatives, reluctantly and largely so as prevent anyone with less affinity to Weber from making a hash of it. And of course, he also orchestrated Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* for the compulsory ballet, most brilliantly and Weberishly, too, so much so that it has come to overshadow

[10] "C'étoit remettre à les pygmées les armes d'Achille". *Journal des débats*, Thursday 9 December 1824, Cols 1–4.

[11] "Je vais me le faire traduire en allemand. J'achèverai la musique; j'en ferai un opéra comme le *Freischütz*, moitié parlé, moitié mélodrame, et le reste musique, j'ajouterai quartre or cinq morceaux […]" *CG* I (see note 4), p. 256.

the work's essential nature as a virtuoso piano piece. We have come to know the French version of the opera a little better, through publication in the New Berlioz Edition, recordings and also perhaps through performances in Paris and elsewhere by John Eliot Gardiner, who has suggested that this is an affinity closer than the work's anticipations of Wagner. Recitative does not tend to be creatively very revealing, but we may note perhaps two points. One is that Berlioz, notwithstanding the Opéra's ban on spoken dialogue, insists on keeping Weber's distinction with Caspar singing, that is preserving human expression however deep he is in sin, whereas the devil Samiel, locked in damnation, is bereft of the humanising quality of music. Later, to introduce Aennchen, Agathe's brightly innocent companion, Berlioz prepares the way by turning her chatter into some fresh and expressive recitative which might well be by Weber.

There are indeed Weber influences on Berlioz. In some cases, these are coming home to roost, as it were, for Weber based a crucial part of his mature operatic style on French opera. In the years when he was directing the opera at Prague, between 1813 and 1816, then at Dresden until his death in 1826, he consciously built his repertory on French opera as fertilization for the growth of German Romantic opera. The works he introduced to German audiences and musicians include a generous amount of Méhul, also works by Dalayrac, Isouard, Boieldieu, Catel and French operas by Cherubini and Spontini. Méhul, whom Berlioz admired with some reservations, gave Weber an example for the melodic manner of Max and Agathe in *Der Freischütz*; more, Méhul had the ability to give entire operatic scenes, even whole operas, a characteristic orchestral colour. The Ossianic opera *Uthal*, set in Scotland, dispenses with violins altogether and its viola-led fogginess portrays the rain and mist which, all foreigners believe, perpetually shroud the northern part of our island. His *Ariodant* set the example of a dissonant chord used motivically, as Weber was to do with Samiel's diminished sevenths; but further, when the plot descends into sinister darkness, so does the orchestration. This and much else in Méhul fell upon receptive ears with Weber, most strikingly in *Der Freischütz* with the descent from the sunlit early village scenes into the dark horror of the Wolf's Glen and back up again into light and restored happiness. This was something that Weber fully acknowledged, even wrote about, and which he used more skilfully and with more resourcefulness and dramatic force than Méhul. The example for Berlioz was this functional use of orchestration, not as colour added to invention but as a crucial element of the invention. Perhaps the most obvious example is in the *Symphonie fantastique*, with the *Scène aux champs* and the calling and echoing oboe and cor anglais and the murmuring drums, music that has little meaning without the specific instrumentation. But over a greater range,

the use of instrumental colour as part of the invention was an essential ingredient of Romantic music and Romantic orchestration.

It is not too difficult to find instances where Berlioz admired and made use of a Weberian tinge of colour, such as with the chalumeau clarinets; but if we are to regard influence as more than imitating but something flowing from one composer's imagination into another's, and also inspiring him, literally breathing life into him, it is the use of ideas in a fresh and individual manner that should be of most interest. If there is a single score which most reflects Berlioz's admiration of Weber, of whom he wrote critically very little compared to the amount he wrote on Beethoven, then I think it would be *The Damnation of Faust*. Perhaps that has something to do with elements in common with *Der Freischütz*, both works treating of love and innocence threatened by diabolical forces taking command of a foolishly impulsive young man.

"Weber's work presents us with the best treatise on instrumentation", it has been declared, by none other than Claude Debussy. "He scrutinizes the soul of each instrument and exposes it with a gentle hand." This is in the course of a fascinating interview with Robert Godet given in the interval of a dress rehearsal of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902.[12] One of many felicities to which he draws attention is the writing for the viola, which Weber sometimes uses unmuted when the other strings are muted, for instance in Agathe's "Leise, leise" or at the start of the *Oberon* overture. This has something to say about the uncertain nature of the contemporary instrument, but Weber does follow Mozart, who liked playing the viola and was the first composer really to understand its solo potential, in writing for it as a solo or obbligato instrument. Mozart also gave it orchestral prominence and individuality, rescuing viola players from the underdog position they had occupied for so long (and which no doubt gave rise to all those viola jokes). All of this Berlioz takes up, so that violas open the whole of *Faust*, forlornly *dolce ed espressivo*; Aennchen's solo obbligato viola is borrowed, for different effect, by Marguérite for "Le Roi de Thulé"; violas are divided and muted at the end of Faust's "Merci doux crépuscule" and divided elsewhere in the work to add particular viola colour to the string ensemble. This is a long way from the humble harmony-filler common in so much 18th century music. Among the woodwind, Weber's emancipation of the piccolo for Caspar's sinister drinking song[13] is turned to similar effect when the evil birds flap at Faust's ride to damnation, but earlier, with great delicacy, no fewer than three piccolos are called into service for the spirits of

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12 Translated by Godet and reprinted in *The Chesterian*, June 1926.

13 Berlioz regarded this *ricanement diabolique* ("*devilish sneering*") as *une des plus heureuses inventions de l'orchestre de Weber* ("*one of Weber's most felicitous orchestral inventions*"), see: Hector Berlioz, *Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*, ed. by Peter Bloom, Kassel 2003 (The New Berlioz Edition 24), p. 242.

flame flickering round Marguerite's house. At the other flute extreme, Berlioz had listened to the curiously brooding sound of low flute thirds that introduce Agathe's "Leise, leise". For Brander's ludicrous song of the rat, Berlioz can call upon the four bassoons that French orchestras could sometimes boast, and of course he had available a cor anglais, which Weber never did. But he must certainly have been grateful for the inspiration of Weber's clarinet writing, taken up in *Faust* with the deep chalumeau register, but also the addition of E flat clarinet and bass clarinet in novel combinations. And Weber's woodland hunting horns sound again, though it is Faust who is the quarry as they call and challenge from afar so frighteningly, and then, at the moment when he is presented with Mephistopheles's pact to which he gives his fatal signature, when they hiss malevolently with stopped tone on a minor third. In a miracle of orchestration, the actual guitar that accompanies Mephistopheles's serenade in the *Eight Scenes from Faust* becomes in the *Damnation* a rattle of pizzicato far more sinister for being played without the strum of any human hand. And there's the grimly ironic use of orchestration when, in "Voici des roses", the deceptive sweetness of Mephistopheles's melody is exposed by the snarl of the accompanying cornet and three trombones.

I think we can fairly say that Berlioz's appreciation of Beethoven and of Weber, not as of equal stature, but as representative German composers, was of crucial historical importance. If he had not responded to Beethoven with such perception, the 19th century programme symphony might have followed a very different course, or dried up completely. In a some cases, the loss might not have been very great, but in the short term it would have included Mendelssohn, who had his own debts to Weber. Coupled with Liszt's appreciation it would have included a number of Russian composers, including Tchaikovsky. Another beneficiary was Mahler, who wrote sparingly but appreciatively of Berlioz and conducted the *Symphonie fantastique* in a programme that also included the *Oberon* overture in his first season with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1898, and whose own music certainly shows his appreciation. His links to Weber were more direct, and needed no help from Berlioz. But that, of course, is another story.